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Transgression

Introduction to the special issue on Ernst Bloch

Johan Siebers (London)

This year marks one century since the publication of Ernst Bloch's first book, *Geist der Utopie* (*The Spirit of Utopia*).¹ It added a philosophical voice to German expressionism, influenced thinkers and writers widely and, despite its mystical undertone, gave Bloch the accolade of being the philosopher of the October revolution; Adorno later wrote that Bloch restored dignity to the concept of utopia with a book that escaped the curse of officialdom.² It showed people like Adorno and Benjamin what it might mean to think for yourself. Bloch's controversial writing career spanned over fifty years until his death in 1977. He was, in Manfred Riedel's apt phrase, a *Grenzgänger*, a borderline figure, moving on the borders between East and West, between historical materialism and the creative inheritance of metaphysical and religious traditions, between communism and loyalty to the ideas of 1789.³ After 1989, when global capitalism spread across the world and postmodernism accompanied it by singing piously from its hymn-sheet, interest in Bloch's thought slumped, although it never disappeared. It withdrew into the area of utopian studies⁴, where it found shelter during those dismal years in which the spirit burnt lower than it had ever before.

Since several years philosophers have begun to return to Bloch's texts, looking for inspiration as we begin to realize that the task demanded of thinking in our time is a new one, one in

¹ Bloch (1977); Bloch (2000).

² For an overview of a century of *Geist der Utopie*, see Johan Siebers, "Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie* after a Century: A Janus-Faced Reading on the Trail of Hope", in Marc Silberman (ed.), *Back to the Future: Innovation and Tradition in German Studies* (Oxford: Peter Lang 2018), pp. 37-62.

³ Manfred Riedel, *Tradition und Utopie: Ernst Blochs Philosophie im Licht unserer geschichtlichen Denkerfahrung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1994).

⁴ See Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse: SUNY 1990) and Jamie Owen Daniel and Tom Moyland (eds.), *Not-Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (London: Verso 1997).

which imagination, creativity and realism have to be brought together, one in which a natural solidarity, a natural collective, of nature and of all people has to be made available in our reflection as well as in our action if we are to meet the very practical and urgent problems our society and our planet face. What Bloch never ceased to stress and what determined his own thinking, that philosophy is irreducible and necessary to keep human consciousness open, is perhaps more urgent today than it was already in his own time. Academic philosophy has largely put itself out of play by withdrawing into an increasingly arcane, scholastic practice of disputation that lacks the power of imagination and the liberating potential we know from the great texts of the philosophical tradition. As the heyday of postmodern philosophy was an ideological loin cloth for late capitalism, so the academic philosophy that dominates the discipline today and is happy to conceive of itself as an appendix of science is a loin cloth of an instrumentalized and reified conception of reason. Critique has become uncritical, we might say with an Adornite flourish. But it is society itself, culture itself, the world itself, that today are mounting the urgency of philosophy, as a creative thinking of “das Allgemeine und Eigentliche in eigener Konzentriertheit” (“the general and the essential with the concentration proper to philosophy”).⁵ The mere, and often moralizing, fetishization of abstract problems and conundrums is not a thinking of the essential; it only serves to keep us from doing that by its veneer of the pure and unapplied. For philosophy to find its feet again as what Bloch calls “theory-praxis” new avenues are needed that can illuminate our dark existence in new, relevant and appealing ways. Bloch’s philosophy of the unfinished world, the anticipatory sensibility and the ontology not-yet-being may help us build these ways.

In this special issue some of the leading Bloch scholars explore this philosophy with an eye to articulating its relevance today. Lucien Pelletier discusses the roots of Bloch’s philosophy of history in his encounter with Neo-Kantianism. Francesca Vidal explores the philosophy of

⁵ Ernst Bloch, “Was ist Philosophie, als suchend und versucherisch?”, in *Philosophische Aufsätze zur objektiven Phantasie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1969), p. 395.

culture by reconstructing Bloch's understanding of the nature of forgetting and placing it in the context of a discussion of cultural memory. Catherine Moir takes up Bloch's speculative materialism from the 1930s, discusses what it might contribute to the contemporary revival of materialism and how it compares to contemporary thinkers who, independently of Bloch, have also adopted the label of speculative materialism. Peter Thompson discusses the metaphysics of contingency and places Bloch squarely within contemporary debates on this topic as we know them from the work of Badiou and Žižek, among others, showing how an engaged, goal-oriented, emancipatory and critical political and cultural practice can be reconciled with an immanent ontology of contingent becoming. Johan Siebers explores the rhetorical nature of Bloch's writings and argues that the split between philosophy and rhetoric is overcome in them.

A sentence from the introduction of Bloch's major work, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*) sums up his work better than any other: "Denken heißt überschreiten." "To think means to transgress." The remainder of this introduction will explore the motif of transgression as a prelude to these forays into an unknown past and an open future.

The wish to smash things

Even the child, forced to be well-behaved, hardly felt at ease. An urge to destroy exists, as a small child Goethe brought it into play. It impelled the boy, one fine afternoon when all in the house was quiet, to keep throwing crockery on to the road because it "shattered so delightfully". On top of this delight came a less definite impulsion towards something, which awoke quite appropriately in a secluded room. 'This, as I grew up, was my favourite place, not really sad but full of longing.' But great things took place beyond the windows, the plain, thunderstorms, the setting sun, a strange world which at the same time was

pleasant and near. The child saw children playing, neighbours strolling in their gardens and tending their flowers, groups of people enjoying themselves. Goethe continues, summarizes the effect of all this: '... this very early aroused in me a feeling of loneliness and a longing arising from this which ... soon showed its influence and was to do so even more later.' The adolescent prowled around in dubious company, found a hidden way into and out of the house, and learnt to tell lies. His breezy, cheerful, young, warm-hearted mother certainly did not force him into this but his father, who was too strict, and a narrowly circumscribed life encouraged him not to be too serious about everything. His fine breeding did not last either, even less so the closer the longed-for student time came. Goethe left his parental home with the following feeling: "The secret joy of a prisoner when he has taken off his chains and has almost filed through the prison bars cannot be greater than mine was as I saw the days dwindling and October approaching.' Thoroughly dissatisfied, the departing son sought a life that was more commensurate with him, equal to him.⁶

In *The wish to smash things*, the short opening section in *The Principle of Hope* to the chapter on the young Goethe (*The young Goethe, non-renunciation, Ariel*), Bloch introduces a developmental pathway that structures the interplay between youth, resistance and the transgressive spirit, named here Ariel, lion of God, the archangel, the sprite with the divine light, set free by Prospero, the rebellious Angel in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the leader of the elves in *Faust* and Shelley's self-chosen poet name. The scene that Goethe describes is a cameo for what drives Bloch's philosophical project.

⁶ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. by Plaice, Plaice and Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 973.

The life of the young Goethe is one in which, amid a seeming abundance and loving presence, something is missing. It manifests itself in stages, gradually becoming clearer and changing from an anonymous force that takes hold of the little child into an address which is answered by the wellspring of a transgressive and poetic will, taken hold of by the adolescent at the onset of his exodus into the world. Its first appearance occurs in the stillness of a forgotten, beautiful afternoon. A spirit stirs: the child found himself, obviously, smashing crockery to pieces on the street, from a window of the house, ‘because it shattered so delightfully’, *so lustig*, so gladly, with so much joy and appetite. Maybe he realized only dimly what he was doing, enthralled by the spirit of the occasion, maybe he had removed the scene and the crockery from the daily normality into which such afternoon occasions and the tableware are routinely enveloped. In Goethe’s few words we sense how the boy, mustered by the spirit of transgression, forgot everything around him, and became one with the desire to smash things. Hegel wrote that the best things children can do with their toys, is to break them. Smashing plates – what more appropriate action could the child have chosen to symbolize what it was that he wanted to break away from: the order of the parental house. The *symbolon*, originally a plate broken in two pieces to create a unique symbol for recognition; only one thing in the world will fit each half. The plate on which food is served, an emblem of home itself, broken into a symbol at the onset of a life, a symbol of a home, the memory of which was never more, but also nothing less, than a possibility for the future, for a new meeting of the two halves broken in that hypnotic hunch-like state. What was stirring in it? The action is the fulfillment of a longing, a remaining allegorical emblem of a life, and yet nostalgia is definitively prevented by it and its remembrance; in this it remains true to the nature of the experience of home in the moment in which that experience comes to itself by breaking open a life into an unknown future. A raucous joy comes over the boy. The smashing is a

revolutionary moment, reminiscent of the dance on the ruins of the Bastille, the first day of a new calendar, the *now* experienced as the beginning of a *new* time, out of chronological time:

What characterises revolutionary classes at their moment of action is the awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode. The Great Revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar presents history in time-lapse mode. And basically it is this same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance.

Thus, calendars do not measure time the way clocks do.⁷

It is the sound, as much as the sight, of the plates flying through the air and crashing to pieces, that excites the young Goethe. The rapture of transgression harbours a first, dark intimation of the existential significance of music. The rhythm and pitch of the shards leaves intervals in which the silence that encloses the scene becomes perceptible in two senses: the threatening complacency of the patriarchal order, constantly at work but invisible until aroused. But also the deeper ontological, anticipatory silence of longing of the *Wandrer's Nachtlied II*, the second wanderer's night song (*Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh'*) is adumbrated here. It is the whole purpose of music to make it perceptible, Bloch often notes – and what lovelier music than the song of the smashing of plates? *So lustig*. The child takes a stroll through time, one fine afternoon.

The scene takes place in a remote chamber of the family house, the favorite hideout of the child. A space of isolation and longing, in which the world, announcing itself through the window, was a welcome stranger, the welcome stranger, still removed from the boy and yet near: a promise of things to come. In the secluded room the desire to smash is experienced more consciously as a longing for something else: the awareness of being alone because the

⁷ *On the concept of history*, thesis XV, in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940, tr. by Jephcott et al., ed. by Eiland and Jennings, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003), 395.

home is not a home. The conjunction of loneliness and longing propels outward, to friends, secrets, a double life, so many attempts at liberation from captivity in estrangement. The moment Goethe the adolescent leaves for university is experienced as an escape from prison, the commencement, finally, of a real journey into the world outside, stepping out onto the street and into a life more fitting. The window in the lonely room has become a prison door under the workings of twinned loneliness and longing; a prison door, however, that can be opened, whose bars can be broken, through which one can step out rather than merely look out. The story recounted here by Bloch shows Goethe's way from being well-behaved and ill at ease to relinquishing the fetters of *fine breeding*, that immaterial and desperate throw at an attitude of control in the face of our true homelessness and drive: the uncanny wonder, *das unbehauste Staunen*, never at rest, a fox without a hole or bird without a nest. In the final act of escape, the young poet makes the homeless wonder of existence his provisional dwelling, a magic cloak, a mobile home.

We have moved from the desire to destroy, unaware of itself, following a hushed call, to a self-chosen isolation in which a longing for something else could arise and become conscious of itself, at first inarticulate and unsure of its direction but later finding a first obstacle on which to test, sharpen, solidify itself: Goethe's necessary attempt to free himself from the law of his father, an escape into freedom as the newly begun mission of a whole life, pre-figured in the attraction of becoming a student, a wayfarer, an artist and shaper: a materialist of the spirit in permanent revolt, the driving lust for smashing the principle of renewal, *poesis* and expression: Ariel.

The spirit that takes hold of the child is an external but still anonymous force. It becomes an address when the boy is alone in his room, in which the world on the other side of the window

is strange, and yet pleasant and near. It is the world itself that beckons the child to come outside; a scene that reminds us of Tischbein's famous drawing of Goethe looking out of a window in Rome; we see that he may have remembered how he felt as a child, while now being called out by the polyphony of scents and colours, the sunlight and sounds, the buzz of life in the Mediterranean.

What he perceives is a longing, at work in all the world as much as within him. The poet is made in finding out how to heed to this longing. Since *Geist der Utopie* (1918), for Bloch the address of the world is a question that invites an answer, and as we are part of the world, we ourselves also are a question to the world that wants an answer. The uncanny wonder at the base of the disclosure of self and world is one of question and attempted answer, *experimentum mundi*. The ultimate question escapes being put into words, no direction at an answer is available, but all speech occurs within its horizon; poetry and philosophy, *Dichten* and *Denken*, are answers to this ontological question which, as a question, gives us an insight into what it means to be. This question has to be kept open and it grants the open; it is what keeps us open as we listen to it. Philosophy for Bloch is the human attempt to live and move and have our being in the vicinity of this question – we begin to sense the distance between the thought that is developed here and what we know as academic philosophy today.

There is a difference between an interpretation of the address of the world to the human being in terms of a questioning and one in terms of a calling. The latter is the more familiar one.

Heidegger sees the call of Being addressing the poet as a rupture in time, a now that is at the same time new, directed towards the future, but made by Being itself. Being speaks, the call is the event that draws us into the heeding of it, the proper task of the poet. Heidegger cites two opening lines:

Jetzt aber tagts! Ich harrt und sah es kommen

But now it dawns! I waited and saw it coming (Hölderlin, *Wie wenn am Feiertage*)

Jetzt komme, Feuer!

Now come, fire! (Hölderlin, *Der Ister*)⁸

In the first poem, the day of celebration or remembrance dawns; it is the remembrance of a beginning, as a remembrance day on a calendar; the poet waited in anticipation for its arrival, he saw it coming, and now it is here. In the second poem the dawn itself is summoned by the call of the poet. In his Lecture on Hölderlin's hymn *Der Ister* Heidegger remarks that, as the dawn will come regardless of the call of the poet, we have to understand that call as a response to the call of the dawn itself, as a recognition by the poet. So poetry becomes the disclosure of world, the heeding of an originary, transcendent call; poetic language is the home of being, the place of origin to which being returns when brought to language by the poet. To see the originary moment of disclosure as a response to a question on the other hand pulls us closer towards an understanding of being in terms of the longing we see so clearly at

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, tr. by McNeill and Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 6-9.

work in the story of the young Goethe. All three stages of the becoming-poet occur in a state of reverie and daydream. A premonition of something to come is fore-felt and expressed in all of them; rather than experiencing an order of being circumscribing the nature of things, an order that will be there anyway and merely has to be acknowledged in poetic language for it to not only *be* but also *appear*, to come into its own, here being itself as much as the being of the poet are still in the making, have to be brought out and realized; being is the realization of what is realizing (*Realisierung des Realisierenden*); the home of it all – in Heidegger's language, the open in which dwelling is possible, is itself not yet there. This is the deeper meaning of the ontology of not-yet being. There is no overriding sense of obedience required here. On the contrary a deep affinity between transgression, outward being and subjective existence becomes clear in the "pre-appearance" (*VorSchein*) of what is to come, from the first smashing of the crockery to the escape from the home that had become a prison. *Jetzt aber tagt's! Ich harrt und sah es kommen. Jetzt komme, Feuer!* Both are spoken from the pre-appearance of what is to come and, through the reflective-indicative '*jetzt*', 'now', place the poet in the pulse of time, in the moment and squarely within the dimension of the newness of the future and the anticipation of what is not yet. 'The daydream is the initial phase of art'.⁹

The smashing of crockery is, as it were, a realized daydream, real in a way that is only dimly perceived by the child itself: he is least half-conscious himself of the wish that motivates him. In many places Bloch refers to Novalis: *Der geheimnisvolle Weg geht nach Innen*. He transforms, transgresses, it: *Der geheimnisvolle Weg geht nach außen*; the way of mystery leads outward; the secret lies without, in a latent and uncanny home. All stages of the becoming of the young poet show this characteristic and are daydreams on the path to realization.

⁹ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. by Plaice, Plaice and Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 106.

Bloch's ontology of immanent longing places the lonely individual within the world, fundamentally akin to him, in the now-moment. That moment is the moment of the promise and the possible realization of freedom. But both world and human being are still dark to themselves, not yet brought out; moving along the path of the will, the intensity of existence, in a reciprocal relation of question and answer, as in the development of the young poet. The ground of the world and the ground of the human being remain hidden in an immediacy that no 'now' can yet fully bring to light and that therefore continues to occasion new moments. We and the world are not yet done. This interpretation of being is not unrelated to the figure of thought of the call and the heeding, but it differs in a crucial respect. Being is not yet what it is; it is itself, and we in it, a process of going out to become itself, ourselves. This is a fundamental motif of materialism: thought does not abide by itself but in seizing the now opens up to the new future and to the world that is other, but that may become home. *Incipit vita nova*, the new life has begun, understood in this way as a hermeneutical principle, renewed again and again, provides the key to the formative events in the life of the young Goethe and to the interpretation of the transgression inherent in the now-moment of anticipatory consciousness and anticipatory being.

In this short episode we see the facial characteristics, as it were, of Bloch's philosophy. His position was a deliberate choice for a Janus-face, looking as much at the speculative systems of German idealism and the literature of the classical period – for which Goethe stands in here - as it does at Marx, dialectical materialism and existentialism. This synthesis has troubled the reception of Bloch's philosophy and marginalized it both for those committed to the revival or continued relevance of German idealism, whose language Bloch does speak quite clearly, as

well as for the Marxists. But the utopian moment is difficult to conceive from any other juncture than the one chosen by Bloch, for it is here that the materialist affirmation of immanence and the idealist affirmation of transformation can find each other in what Bloch called transcending without transcendence. The place the utopian philosophy of Bloch makes available for us is one of an unfinished world, where possibilities can be thought out, imagined, created, and tried out. It is a world in which the contemplative awareness of being is not at odds with attempts to change the world, but both reinforce each other in a way that moves decisively beyond the aestheticizations of Nietzsche's artist-philosophy as well as Kant's regulative idealism. Bloch invites to listen to the ethics that is implicit in the episode of the young Goethe, the ethics implicit in the drive to transgress, destroy and create. Bloch's open-ended, contingent, dynamic philosophical expressionism is precisely for this reason a voice worth listening to today. As the capitalist institutions are changing face – we do not know if they are crumbling or becoming even more unshakeable – the idea of an emancipatory collective, one that includes the human and the natural world, one that finds new ways to transgress the socio-economic imperative of limitless growth but instead learns to see the infinite transgressions involved in building a world as a home, becomes more and more urgent. Bloch's philosophy can help us to learn to imagine, anticipate and bring about a world without exploitation and open to the new. It can help us to understand that such a world is pervaded by a radical hope, a hope that must be “anchored somewhere beyond the horizons”.¹⁰

This issue of the *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* gives a platform to a number of scholars who are engaged in such a creative process of listening. May it encourage you to return to Bloch's writings with a fresh gaze, or if you have not opened his books before, to do

¹⁰ Václav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (London: Faber, 1990), 181.

so and create your own response. As we are becoming more and more aware of the need for new paths in thinking, this wayfarer on the path of hope shines a beckoning light from the frontiers of the unfinished world.

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